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# An Exploration of the Impact of Foster Placement Breakdown on Foster Carers

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*CARL Research Project*



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- provide their services on an affordable basis;
- promote and support public access to and influence on science and technology;
- create equitable and supportive partnerships with civil society organisations;
- enhance understanding among policymakers and education and research institutions of the research and education needs of civil society, and
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# **Executive summary**

## **Background to the Study**

This research has come about through the Science Shop Project within UCC. The CSO who proposed this research are The Irish Foster Care Association-Waterford Branch. IFCA-Waterford proposed that the impact of placement breakdown on foster carers be explored. The Irish Foster Care Association-Waterford Branch identified a gap in the research in this area. The impact of placement breakdown on foster children is well established within the literature however the impact of placement breakdown on foster carers is not as extensively researched both within and Irish and International context. The Irish Foster Care Association- Waterford Branch acknowledged that a number of its members had experienced foster placement breakdown and it was interested in gaining a greater understanding of the impact of placement breakdown on foster carers. IFCA-Waterford sought to gain a greater understanding of foster carers needs in relation to placement breakdown, with a view to using the research findings to further the education and training of foster carers in the future.

## **Aims and Objectives**

The overall aim of the research is to explore the impact of placement breakdown on foster carers. The primary objective is to understand this impact with a view to gaining a greater awareness of foster carers needs at this time. The researcher seeks to explore what supports, policies and procedures are available to meet the needs of foster carers if placement breakdown occurs.

## **Methodology**

This research is a small-scale qualitative study. Undertaking qualitative research allowed the researcher to focus on foster carers experiences of placement breakdown and explore the impact of these experiences on their lives. Through the use of an Interpretive framework the researcher gleaned a greater insight into the participants understanding of the impact of placement breakdown in their lives. Through the utilisation of a literature review along with primary research involving semi-structured interviews with foster six carers, the researcher explored the impact of foster placement breakdown on foster carers. A number of primary themes emerged within the research and these are explored in greater depth within Chapter Four of the research.

## **Results Recommendations**

The overarching theme that emerged within this research was the impact of ‘Grief and Loss’ on foster carers in the wake of placement breakdown. It was found that foster carers and foster families become emotionally invested in their foster children, and it can be difficult to accept and come to terms with the loss of foster children through placement breakdown if it occurs. Foster carers feel that they are often times left to deal with the fall out of the breakdown alone and cite that support and guidance in helping other foster children and family members come to terms with the loss would be welcomed. Foster carers enter a grief process and turn to close friends and family for support. While link workers were named as a useful source of support foster carers felt that the child’s social worker could also engage in the support process to a greater extent. Feelings of powerlessness and loss of control dominate foster carers experiences of placement breakdown. Overall it would appear that poor communication and engagement between social workers (child protection social workers specifically) and foster carers add to this feeling of powerlessness. Carers are left angry and hurt if they are excluded from the decision making process. Foster carers affirm that continued contact with the foster child eases the pain of placement breakdown, however this can also add to the feeling of powerlessness as the care has no control over the child’s situation and this can be very distressing for carers. There would appear to be a direct link between placement breakdown and the way in which future foster placements are approached. While some carers struggled to ‘fill the void’ in their lives in the absence of the foster child others took a break from fostering, and some had not returned to foster again since experiencing placement breakdown. The findings affirm that foster carers have a clear set of needs in relation to placement breakdown. These needs pertain to support, communication and engagement and training. These needs are individual to the carers circumstances, therefore social workers need to engage with foster carers in order to ascertain their needs in relation to placement breakdown and ensure that these needs are met.

## **Recommendations**

- The researcher recommends that a Foster Carer Plan (similar to a Child Care Plan) should be implemented, whereby the individual and specific needs of the foster carer and the extended family in relation to placement breakdown are outlined.
- The researcher recommends that the support service in place within the Irish Foster Care Association be extended to incorporate access to support and advice from social workers as well as trained foster carers on a 24/7 basis (perhaps through the extension of helpline services).
- The researcher recommends that the Irish Foster Care Association publicise this support service to a greater extent so as to ensure that all foster carers are aware of the support services that are available to them.
- The researcher suggests a number of training days should occur on an annual basis, whereby social workers and foster carers come together and undertake joint training. This would facilitate understanding and respect of roles and would help nurture team work which in turn leads to greater communication and engagement between social workers and foster carers.
- The researcher recommends that a Best Practice Policy in respect of Placement Breakdown should be devised and implemented within all social work departments. This policy should take into consideration the needs of the foster child and the foster carer and should contain a risk assessment to identify placements that are in danger of breaking down, as well as support services that can be made available to foster carers if placement breakdown occurs

## **Implications of the study's finding**

Overall the findings from this research have long-standing implications in terms of how both foster carers and social workers view placement breakdown. The findings indicate that foster placement breakdown can have a profound and lasting impact on the lives of foster carers. The findings clearly indicate that foster carers go through a grieving process after placement breakdown. They also indicate that foster carers must resolve their feelings of powerlessness in order to reach the acceptance stage of the grief process. The findings from this study indicate that foster carers have a clear set of needs in relation to placement breakdown. Therefore social workers should engage with foster carers regarding

their needs, ascertaining if the carer would like continued contact with the foster child or if they need to avail of counselling supports. It would appear social workers need to recognise the distress and pain placement breakdown causes for foster carers and their families and work in collaboration with each other and with families to ensure that foster carers are supported in the most appropriate and adequate manner. This will require each worker to understand that every case is different and the needs of foster carers differ also. Social Workers need to recognise and credit the work undertaken by foster carers within the lives of the foster child and a concerted effort towards recognising foster carers as professionals would ameliorate foster carers feeling disrespected and undervalued.

## **Authors Conclusions**

In summation foster placement breakdown has a significant impact on foster carers and it is often the case that this impact is not given the recognition it deserves. Foster carers grieve the loss of a foster child through placement breakdown in a similar manner to grieving the death of a loved one. However, this grief is coupled with feelings of powerlessness as a result of difficulties with social workers and social work practice. Placement breakdown dictates how foster carers approach future fostering placements therefore, a great deal of support and thought should be put into helping foster carers overcome the impact of placement breakdown. Foster carers should be given an opportunity to outline their individual needs in relation to placement breakdown and every effort should be made to meet these needs. Foster carers are the back bone upon which the care system stands, without their input and dedication to children in care it is fair to say that the landscape of the care system in Ireland would be very different. As a result, foster carers should be cherished and valued and every effort should be made to ensure that if foster placement breakdown occurs, the impact on carers is recognised, and that foster carers receive the support and respect they deserve in order to move on from this difficult experience and continue to foster into the future.

## **Chapter Outline**

**Chapter 2: Methodology.** This chapter examines the use of qualitative methods within this research and it explores the use of the Interpretive conceptual framework. This chapter dissects issues relating to



research methods, data collection and analysis. The limitations of the study are discussed and ethical concerns that arose while carrying out the research are also addressed.

**Chapter 3: Literature Review.** This chapter opens with a review of the social policy and law that govern foster care in Ireland. The second section consists of a review of the literature that exists in relation to the impact of placement breakdown on foster carers.

**Chapter 4: Research Findings.** This chapter outlines the primary research findings which were gathered from semi-structured interviews with six foster carers. It looks at the findings under the themes of ‘Grief and Loss’, ‘Powerlessness’, ‘Approach to Future Foster Placements’ and ‘Needs of Foster Carers’.

**Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations.** The final chapter gives an overall summary and analysis of the primary research findings and the findings from the literature review. Numerous recommendations based on the findings are proposed by the researcher. The research concludes with a reflection and some concluding remarks from the researcher.

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# **Chapter One: Introduction and Background.**

## ***1.1 Title***

*'An Exploration of the Impact of Foster Placement Breakdown on Foster Carers.'*

## ***1.2 Introduction***

The aim of this chapter is to outline the research rationale for the study; it also outlines the research questions, aims and objectives. Within the chapter there will be a broad introduction and explanation to the topic of foster care and foster placement breakdown. Key terms will be defined and explored. A brief overview of the history of foster care in Ireland and a chapter outline concludes the chapter.

## ***1.3 Research Rationale***

This research project has come about through the Science Shop Project (SSP) within UCC. The SSP affords opportunities to students to carry out research on behalf of Civil Society Organisations (CSO's). The CSO who proposed this research topic are the Irish Foster Care Association- Waterford Branch (IFCA). The Irish Foster Care Association offer support and information to foster carers pertaining to changes in practice in relation to foster care. The Irish Foster Care Association works in partnership with the Health Service Executive (HSE) to promote foster care as the best alternative for children who cannot live with their own families. The Association provides opportunities where all those who are interested in foster care can get together to support one another, air their views and where necessary, campaign for improvements in the regulations (IFCA, 2012, [online]).

The Irish Foster Care Association- Waterford Branch recognised that there is a gap in the research pertaining to the impact of foster placement breakdown on foster carers, therefore the rationale for proposing this research is to bridge that gap in the research. IFCA- Waterford Branch seeks to understand foster carers experiences of placement breakdown in order to provide appropriate support and training in relation to placement breakdown to foster carers in the future.

### ***1.4 Research Aims and Objectives***

The overall aim of the research is to explore the impact of placement breakdown on foster carers. The primary objective is to understand this impact with a view to gaining a greater awareness of foster carers needs at this time. Through the utilisation of a literature review along with primary research involving semi-structured interviews with foster carers, the researcher seeks to explore what supports, policies and procedures are available to meet the needs of foster carers if placement breakdown occurs.

### ***1.5 Research Questions***

1. How does placement breakdown impact on foster carers?
2. What are the needs of foster carers in the event of placement breakdown occurring?
3. What supports, policies, and procedures are available to foster carers if placement breakdown occurs?

### ***1.6 Defining the Terms***

This section defines the key terms that are discussed throughout the research.

***1.6.1 Foster Care:*** Foster Care in Ireland is understood as an alternative care setting for children who cannot remain in the care of their family as they cannot care for them adequately for various reasons (HSE, 2008). Children enter foster care when all efforts to support and maintain the child in their own family have failed (IFCA, 1993). Children come into care for various reasons, each case is different and there are many contributing factors that are taken into consideration (Sinclair et al, 2005).

Other definitions of fostering include “*providing a family life for a child*” (Merron, 1983:1), whereby the foster child is incorporated into the everyday life of the foster family. There are different types of foster care, for example, relative foster care, long and short term foster care, respite and emergency foster care. The focus of this research is on the impact of placement breakdown on non-relative foster carers in cases of long-term foster placements.

**1.6.2 Foster Carer or Foster Parent:** is defined under the Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations (1995) as “a person other than a relative of a child who is taking care of the child on behalf of a health board”. Foster carers come from a range of different backgrounds and bring with them a wealth of life experience. The Irish Foster Care Association (2012, [online]) state that foster carers should have the ability to communicate and engage effectively with children, a range of professionals and the child’s birth family. Foster carers also “need to be flexible and non-judgmental, as well as patient and understanding” (ibid).

### **1.6.3 Placement Breakdown.**

*There are many ways of labelling and describing an unexpected foster placement ending, such as breakdown, disruption, removal, crisis or unplanned ending* (Brookes et al, 2011:104).

For the purpose of this study an unexpected ending to a placement will be referred to as ‘placement breakdown’. Placement breakdown can be defined as “a situation in which any of the parties involved initiates a premature termination of care” (Sallnas, 2004:11) or a “placement ending that was not indicated in the social work plan” (Berridge and Cleaver, 1987:30). Placement breakdown indicates that the placement has not worked out for either the child or the foster family and it is necessary for the child to move to a new placement (IFCA, 1993). For the purpose of this research, placement breakdown refers to the unplanned ending of a long term placement with a non-relative foster carer (Brookes et al, 2011).

## **1.7 Overview of the History of Foster Care in Ireland**

Foster care in Ireland has a long history stretching back centuries. “Fosterage” occurred across all classes and social divides (Hogan, 2002:30). Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century the concept of boarding out had become a common occurrence - whereby children from poorer backgrounds were sent to live with families in an effort to divert them from workhouses. The establishment of the Irish Free State shifted the responsibility of foster care to new Boards of Health. This responsibility was further cemented several decades later by the Health Act 1953 which “empowered the Health Board to have a

*child cared for ... by boarding him out (foster care)”* (Hogan, 2002:32). The Health Board and the carer signed a contract whereby in exchange for a wage the carer would provide for the child’s needs. The *Boarding Out of Children Regulations 1954* introduced protections for both the child and foster carer, stating that foster carers must be assessed and insofar as possible the child should be matched in the most appropriate placement. The *1970 Health Act* established the Health Boards in the format that were in existence until the introduction of the Health Service Executive (HSE) in 2005 within which the majority of fostering services in Ireland operate.

## ***1.8 Chapter Outline***

**Chapter 2: Methodology.** This chapter examines the use of qualitative methods within this research and it explores the use of the Interpretive conceptual framework. Issues relating to research methods, data collection and analysis are also dissected. The limitations of the study are discussed and ethical concerns that arose while carrying out the research are also addressed.

**Chapter 3: Literature Review.** This chapter opens with a review of the social policy and law that govern foster care in Ireland. The second section consists of a review of the literature that exists in relation to the impact of placement breakdown on foster carers.

**Chapter 4: Research Findings.** This chapter outlines the primary research findings which were gathered from semi-structured interviews with six foster carers. It looks at the findings under the themes of ‘Grief and Loss’, ‘Powerlessness’, ‘Approach to Future Foster Placements’ and ‘Needs of Foster Carers’.

**Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations.** The final chapter gives an overall summary and analysis of the primary research findings and the findings from the literature review. Numerous recommendations based on the findings are proposed by the researcher. The research concludes with a reflection and some concluding remarks from the researcher.



## ***1.9 Conclusion***

Overall this chapter has outlined the rationale for this research project. The main aims and objectives of the research have been established. Discussion pertaining to definition and key terms within the research is included. A brief overview of the history of foster care in Ireland is included. Finally a chapter outline is provided.

## **Chapter Two: Methodology.**

### ***2.1 Introduction***

This chapter discusses the rationale for adopting a qualitative approach within the research. It will also look at the conceptual framework of Interpretivism. Research methods, data collection and analysis methods are explored. Lastly the limitations and the ethical considerations are addressed.

### ***2.2 Participatory research***

This research project was born out of the Science Shop Project within UCC; therefore by its very nature the research is participatory. Participatory research *“sets itself apart...from other forms of...research because of the central role that non-experts play”* (Park, 2001:81). At the centre of this research were foster carers who wanted research into the impact of placement breakdown on foster carers to be undertaken because of the impact this experience had on their individual lives. Foster carers identified a gap in research and wanted to help bridge this gap. Cornwall and Jewkes (1995:1668) argue that *“one of the key strengths [of participatory research] is seen to reside in exploring local knowledge and perceptions”*. These foster carers recognised as a collective they were the only people who could give a true account of the impact of placement breakdown on foster carers. At all stages of the research the Irish Foster Care Association- Waterford Branch was consulted. Through discussion and negotiation, the research progressed. Problems regarding research methods and difficulties with participant selection and participation were overcome through close working relations with the Irish Foster Care Association- Waterford Branch and the researcher. Following the submission of this research, the research findings will be presented to the Irish Foster Care Association- Waterford Branch both in written and oral format.

### ***2.3 Qualitative Research***

The decision to undertake qualitative research was made with the Irish Foster Care Association- Waterford Branch wish to have an in depth study of the impact of placement breakdown on foster

carers in mind. As they were interested in exploring the views and opinions of foster carers in relation to placement breakdown, a qualitative approach was more favourable (Silverman, 2006). As Qualitative research *“focuses on the meanings and interpretations of social phenomena and social processes in the particular contexts in which they occur”* (Jupp, 2006:249) it allowed the researcher to explore the impact of placement breakdown on foster carers. Data collected as a result of qualitative research tends to be *“rich in detail”* (Jary and Jary, 2000:504), therefore affording the researcher the opportunity to gain a greater understanding and a deeper insight into the impact placement breakdown has on the lives of foster carers and their needs at this time.

## ***2.4 Conceptual Framework***

This research study was underpinned by an Interpretivist framework within which *“the researcher endeavours to understand the opinions, emotional responses and attitudes articulated by participants”* (Carey, 2009:53). Interpretivism allows the researcher to *“see through the eyes of the people being studied”* (Bryman, 2008:385). The researcher’s role was to obtain the perspectives of foster carers in relation to the impact placement breakdown had on their lives. Through the use of semi-structured interviews the foster carers explored their experiences of foster placement breakdown recalling the impact it had. These foster carers were the social actors within their own social world, interpreting their own feelings, actions and experiences in relation to foster placement breakdown. The researcher was tasked with the job of exploring and making sense of these interpretations, drawing them together thematically and presenting them within the research findings.

## **Research Methods**

### ***2.5 Literature Review***

Carrying out a literature review allows the researcher to *“locate and review the existing literature that pertains to the research topic”* (Jupp, 2006:162). Part of the Irish Foster Care Association-Waterford Branch’s rationale for seeking research on the impact of placement breakdown on foster carers was the

fact that it is an under researched area both internationally and within the Irish context. Therefore a comprehensive literature review was vital in order to make sense of the research findings.

## ***2.6 Semi structured Interviews***

Focus groups were initially the agreed primary method of data collection. However prior to the first focus group been undertaken the Irish Foster Care Association- Waterford Branch altered the agreement due to concerns in relation to foster carers privacy. It was decided subsequently that semi-structured interviews would be a more appropriate method of data collection. By conducting semi-structured interviews there were opportunities to change questions, offer explanations, include additional questions or conversely exclude certain question where it was appropriate as the interview progressed. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to “*follow up interesting responses*” (Robson, 2002:272) which enabled emerging themes to be explored in greater detail.

## ***2.7 Sampling***

The sampling method employed within this research study was purposive. Blaikie (2010:178) argues that the “*purposive sampling method [is used] for selecting some cases of a particular type*”. In order to fit the research criterion the participants must have experienced placement breakdown, hence the need for the sample to be purposive. The Irish Foster Care Association- Waterford Branch furnished the researcher with a list of twelve willing participants who had been informed about the nature of the research. Each participant was written to outlining the details of the research (see Appendix A) and six participants responded, including one couple.

## ***2.8 Data Collection and Data Analysis***

The data was collected using a Dictaphone. Permission was sought from all participants and an informed consent form was signed (see Appendix B). These recordings were transcribed and utilised to identify emerging themes. As the “*interpretation of data is at the core of qualitative research*” (Flick, 1998:178) it was vital that the data was coded in accordance with themes and patterns that emerged

(Blaikie, 2010). A series of colour codes were drawn up by the researcher whereby each theme had a dedicated colour. Transcribing was a lengthy process (Robson, 2002) however it “*facilitated immersion in the data*” (Samrai et al, 2011:42).

## ***2.9 Limitations to the Research***

This research is a small-scale qualitative research project. As a result the six participants interviewed is a representative sample within the HSE South East region therefore the research findings are unique to this area. The lack of Irish research on the impact of placement breakdown on foster carers is another limitation as it prohibited the researcher from drawing comparisons to other studies. The word count of the project limits the number of themes that can be explored within the primary research findings.

## ***2.10 Ethical Issues and Considerations***

Punch (1998:281) argues that “*all social research involves ethical issues*. The ethical issues within this research were considered under three areas, namely, harm, informed consent and privacy of participants (Bryman, 2008). The nature of the topic within this study was particularly sensitive and emotive; therefore the semi-structured interviews required a lot of preparation to ensure that foster carers were not placed in vulnerable or difficult positions recounting their experiences of foster placement breakdown. An agreement with the Irish Foster Care Association-Waterford Branch was made whereby the foster carers link worker was the agreed support contact person in the event of the foster carer requiring extra support following the interview. All efforts were taken to ensure that the interviews occurred within the foster carers home at a time suitable to them, where it was felt they would be more comfortable. All foster carers signed a consent form (see Appendix B) stating they understood the nature of the research. The research methods were altered in order to protect the privacy and anonymity of participants within their own organisation and pseudonyms have been utilised throughout the research findings. However the participants raised concerns regarding identifiable details of foster children and the foster carers within the research findings. It was agreed that identifying details would be altered and where this was not possible the researcher would return to the foster carer and discuss the detail in question and negotiate regarding inclusion within the study.

Overall the researcher had to manage the emotions of the participants, approaching the interviews in a respectful manner but keeping in mind the fact that the researcher was interviewing the participants in the capacity of student/researcher and not a practitioner (Berg, 2009). Therefore it was necessary to be mindful of “*the researchers’ values, beliefs and possible prejudices*” (Carey, 2009:155) so as not to influence the participants throughout the interview.

### ***2.11 Conclusion***

This chapter has examined and discussed the concept of participatory research. Qualitative research and the conceptual framework of Interpretivism were also explored. The research methods of literature review and semi-structured interviews are examined in greater detail. Issues relating to sampling, data analysis and collection are discussed. In the final section of this chapter the limitations of the research along with the ethical considerations are dissected in greater detail.

## Chapter Three: Literature Review.

### ***3.1 Introduction.***

The aim of this chapter is to review the literature that exists in relation to the impact of placement breakdown on foster carers. Included in this section is a discussion pertaining to the law and social policy that underpins practice and procedure in relation to placement breakdown. The second section explores the impact of placement breakdown on foster carers under a number of key themes. It should be noted that the impact of placement breakdown on foster carers is an area that is under-researched in the Irish context and the absence of Irish research is evident throughout the review.

### ***3.2 Foster Care- The Law and Policy in Ireland.***

In relation to law and policy in Ireland, foster care is governed by the Child Care Act 1991. This Act places a duty of care on Health Board (now the HSE) to safeguard “*children who are not receiving adequate care and protection*”. This Act states that “*the welfare of the child is the first and paramount consideration*” and that where possible children should be consulted on decisions that are being made in relation to their welfare and care. It also called for regulations to be drawn up that would regulate the provision of foster care. The Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations were introduced in 1995. These regulations outline the procedures for foster carer assessment and state that foster carers should “*receive appropriate advice, guidance and training in relation to the foster care of children*”.

Regulations are laid out in relation to the termination of placements, stating that if the Health Board decides to terminate the placement they have an obligation to give the foster carer 28 days written notice. Article 23 of the Regulations makes a provision for counselling support for foster carers in the event of placement breakdown stating that;

*A health board shall in appropriate cases make available counselling services to foster parents who have a child removed from their custody.*

However the regulations do not define what might warrant an “*appropriate case*” thus leaving the provision for this level of support to foster carers up to the interpretation of the different Health Boards.

The 2001 *Report of the Working Group on Foster Care- Foster Care a Child Centred Partnership* called for National Standards in Foster Care to be introduced across Ireland and in 2003 *The National Standards for Foster Care* was published. The Standards outline best practice within the area of foster care in Ireland. They provide for the assessment, supervision, support, training and review of foster carers. The Standards dictate that every foster carer should be provided with a link worker whose role is to provide support and supervision, ensure the foster carer receives necessary training and ensure that counselling is offered to foster carers “*where a placement breakdown has occurred*” (National Standards for Foster Care, 2003:36). Article 16.2 of the Standards (2003:37) states that “*training programmes take account of assessed training needs, child care policy and practice, research, inspection findings and best practice*”. It also takes into account the assessed needs of the child and states that “*where necessary foster carers receive training on key areas relevant to the specific needs of an individual child before his/her placement*” (ibid).

The *Child Care Amendment Act 2007* enhanced the rights of foster carers who care for children for a continuous period of five years or more. These foster carers now have the right to apply to the court to receive more autonomy in relation to medical consent, passport issues, and other daily decisions regarding the child i.e. permission to go to a concert. However the HSE must have consented prior to these decisions being taken. This Act is in a sense an acknowledgement of the work and dedication of foster carers in respect of their foster children and rewards them with an opportunity to gain a greater level of responsibility in relation to their foster children. It essentially allows foster carers to make decisions in respect of their foster child that they would make in relation to their own children. Overall it strengthens the parental role of the foster carer.



The 2010 Health Information Quality Authority (HIQA) of Ireland *Draft National Quality Standards for Residential and Foster Care for Services for Children and Young People* make the distinction between professional staff i.e. residential care workers and foster carers. These standards are more stringent in terms of laying down in greater detail the role of foster carers. Foster carers are expected to “*observe appropriate boundaries in their dealings with each child and young person placed with them*” (HIQA, 2010:34). The Standards make the provision of the availability of link workers to foster carers out of hours where this is necessary. It also reaffirms that training should be on-going and that training needs should be discussed with both the link worker and the child’s social worker. However there is no mention within the HIQA standards of measures that could be implemented in the event of placement breakdown to provide structured and planned support to foster carers. This would appear to be the trend right across legislation and policy that guides foster care provision in Ireland. There is emphasis on support through the link worker and it is stated that training should occur regularly to equip foster carers with the tools necessary to provide the right level of support and care for their foster children. However it would appear that there is no concrete training course to equip foster carers with the skills necessary to deal with placement breakdown.

### ***3.3 Factors that Cause Placement Breakdown***

The reasons for placement breakdown are wide and varying, it is often a combination of different factors which cause a breakdown to occur. Factors relating to the child, factors associated with the foster family and social work influences can contribute to placement breakdown (Berridge and Cleaver, 1987).

#### ***3.3.1 Factors Regarding the Child***

Factors connected with the background of the foster child, particularly the child’s behaviour can be attributed to placement breakdown. There is “*a significant proportion of children in foster care [who] display behavioural and emotional difficulties which place considerable demands upon their foster families and agencies*” (Selig, 2006:70). A child with an attachment disorder or conduct disorder is more likely to experience placement breakdown (Sallnas et al, 2004). In general, older children or teens

placed in foster care “*are at greater risk of experiencing a placement breakdown*” (Berridge and Cleaver, 1987:42). Also, children who have had many placements in the past are at a higher risk of experiencing subsequent placement breakdown (Striijker, 2008).

### ***3.3.2 Social Work Influences***

It is argued within the literature that there are many issues relating to social work that can contribute to placement breakdown. A major criticism levelled at social workers is inappropriate matching, whereby the social work team places the child with an unsuitable foster carer or within an inappropriate placement that fails to meet the needs of the child (Street and Davies, 1999 and Sinclair and Wilson, 2003). It is documented within the literature that foster carers can find social workers inaccessible and unapproachable. Foster carers report that they do not have enough contact with the foster child’s social worker. Sometimes foster carers feel that they are left to cope on their own with the child and that social workers have abandoned them (Farmer et al, 2005). Another social work influence that may impact on placement breakdown is that foster carers feel that they are not given the recognition and respect that they deserve from social workers. Foster carers feel that they are not regarded as team members in planning the foster child’s care (Fisher, 2000). Lack of support for foster carers from social workers is a major factor within placement breakdown.

### ***3.3.3 Factors Associated with the Foster Carer***

Research suggests that “*the quality of the relationship between the child and their foster carers can also be a significant indicator of placement outcome*” (Brookes et al, 2011:105). Factors that jeopardise this relationship, such as the presence of birth children or other foster children within the placement have been found to contribute to placement breakdown. Foster carers within Gilbertson and Barber’s (2003) study of ‘*Carer Perspectives of Placement Breakdown*’ found that in some instances carers felt unprepared to deal with certain situations and this was due in part to lack of pre-placement preparation, whereby the foster carer did not receive adequate information regarding the child, their background and needs. Sargent and O’ Brien’s study (2004) found that a lack of training in relation to the mental health needs of foster children was a barrier to the foster carer providing the child with the care they require.

Foster carers also state that lack of emotional support is a factor that can add to already stressful situations, thus making lack of support a major contributing factor to the breakdown of the placement.

### ***3.4 The Impact of Placement Breakdown on Foster Carers.***

This section examines the impact of placement breakdown that is documented within the literature. It would appear that the most significant impact of placement breakdown on foster carers noted within the literature is that of grief and loss. Oftentimes the foster carer engages in a process similar to the stages of grief, whereby they go through a range of emotions and they feel powerless within the situation. It would appear that certain elements that cause placement breakdown such as issues surrounding training, support, communication and engagement have an impact on foster carers also. There would appear to be a correlation between placement breakdown and the way foster carers approach a new placement.

#### ***3.4.1 Impact of Grief and Loss on Foster Carers.***

After placement breakdown, foster carers can experience a great sense of grief and loss. It would appear there is less emphasis placed on the impact on foster carers and sometimes their loss can be overlooked (Edelstein et al, 2001, Strijker, 2008). Foster carers can become “*emotionally invested*” (Butler and Charles, 1999) in their foster children and there is a “*desire that they would become full family members*” (ibid). There is often a sense of pride felt by carers when a child makes progress while they are in their care (ibid). This sense of achievement further cements the foster carers relationship with the child. Therefore, the unexpected departure of a child from the foster family can be likened to bereavement as there may be unresolved feelings of hurt, grief and a great sense of loss (Edelstein et al, 2001 and Butler and Charles, 1999). Edelstein et al, (2001:12) argues that this grief “*touches every aspect of the person, [they] may feel depressed, anxious, or angry, and be consumed by yearning for the lost child*”. Kubler Ross’s ‘stages model’ which cites “*denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance*” as being the primary stage of grief is applicable to foster carers experiences of placement breakdown (Romaine, 2002:3). It is not uncommon for foster carers to find themselves in situations of denial; frequently engaging in blaming behaviour is easier as it detracts

from the feelings of loss.” (Foster Care and Adoption Resource Centre, 2009, [online]). Foster carers may find themselves bargaining whereby they “*substitute other people...to avoid experiencing grief...I’ll just take another nine year old. He’ll help me forget*” (ibid). Guilt is also very common, where the foster carer feels they have failed. Carers tend to go through a period of self-reproach and question all of the actions they took that may have contributed to the placement breakdown (Butler and Charles, 1999, Brookes et al, 2001).

Unresolved feelings of grief and loss can have a detrimental impact on foster carers, their families and indeed future foster children in the long term (Edelstein et al, 2001). Romaine (2002:129) argues that “*foster carers need the permission and the time to grieve*”. There is immense emphasis placed within the literature on “*ending care relationships*” (Roberts, 2011:35) and how the impact of endings can either bring about closure or create huge damage to all involved. Giving foster carers the opportunity to end the placement in a way that they see as appropriate can reduce the impact of grief and loss. Allowing for continued contact brings about a sense of relief as it can “*reduce carers sense of failure*” (Butler and Charles, 1999:56). Training and support play a huge role in terms of facilitating and helping foster carers deal with feelings of grief and loss. However the absence of support and training exacerbate feelings of grief and loss and this has a significant impact on foster carers.

### ***3.4.2 Impact of Factors that Cause Placement Breakdown.***

#### **Training**

Lack of training and lack of awareness or knowledge on the impact of placement breakdown can impact quite negatively on foster carers (Pithouse et al, 2002). In the first instance, not having the adequate knowledge and training to deal with the foster child’s challenging behaviour can be a stress indicator for foster carers (Brown and Bednar, 2006). One of the main reasons cited for carers ceasing to foster was “*burn out or stress*” (Triseliotis et al, 1998:338). UK literature encourages foster agencies and Local Authorities to train foster carers “*in issues of...separation and loss. Carers should be encouraged...to develop awareness of...the ways in which they cope with grief*” (Romaine, 2002:129) thereby equipping themselves with the necessary skills to ensure they will cope in the event of

placement breakdown. Conversely when foster carers are aware of how placement breakdown may impact on them it facilitates carers to emotionally recover from the experience.

### **Support**

It would appear that *“good support and supervision of foster carers is likely to result in their feeling satisfied and staying on”* (Selick, 2006:72). Foster carers value hugely the support of their fostering link worker and ‘friendship’ is important to foster carers with many citing that their link worker is *“like one of the family”* (Kirton et al, 2007:11). However; when support is not forthcoming, the impact on the foster carer is huge and it can influence how carers engage with social workers (ibid). This lack of support felt by foster carers is being ameliorated in part by the growing movement towards the professionalisation of foster care (Wilson and Evetts, 2006), whereby foster carers are seen as members of the professional team that care for the child. It would appear that *“the expertise of foster carers is a resource that is too often overlooked by social workers”* (O’ Dell, 2008:19). Nevertheless the move towards professionalisation of foster carers brings about a new *“level of recognition, status and standards of practice”* (ibid). This move is not without its problems. It would appear that difficulties exist with social workers’ acceptance of foster carers new elevated position. While support from social work is vital for foster carers in the wake of placement breakdown *“help from friends emerged as an important antidote to strain”* (Farmer et al, 2005:247). This indicates that with proper support, foster carers can be fulfilled within their role as carers and they can also overcome the emotional difficulties associated with placement breakdown.

### **Communication and Engagement**

Communication and engagement issues between social workers and foster carers can impact on foster carers. Foster carers can be left reeling if a placement breaks down due to the fact that the child was placed unsuitably in their care. Feelings of failure can be amplified particularly if the carer has asked for the placement to end due to a mismatch (Sinclair and Wilson, 2003). The effect on foster carers who have not been supplied with relevant and adequate information from social workers in relation to a child is vast (Gilbertson and Barber, 2003). The impact on foster carers where social workers are

inaccessible or unavailable is also significant. These carers may feel that they are left to cope on their own in the aftermath of the placement breakdown with little support from the child's social worker. This leads to feelings of being unappreciated and undervalued. Carers feel unappreciated when their opinions are not sought, and feel demoralised when they are not seen as equal team members by social workers. Communication difficulties between foster carers and social workers are very stressful for carers (Farmer et al, 2005). Where this happens;

*There [is] a strong sense of fragmentation... which [is] characterised by discourses of mistrust and miscommunication. This means that emotional reactions to the breakdown [are] often suppressed or dismissed, resentments build up and attempts to find a solution [are] thwarted by silence or angry recrimination (Brookes et al, 2011:103).*

Where anger and frustration has amounted the future working relationship between the foster carer and social worker can be compromised and damaged, thus leading the foster care to approach future placements in a different way.

### ***3.4.3 Approaching future foster placements.***

Foster carers approach to future placements can be determined by their experiences of placement breakdown. Farmer et al, (2005:121) states that;

*Denying or avoiding the many losses, disappointments and anxieties that surround an unexpected placement ending may actually compromise the ability of all stakeholders to cope with the transitions that follow.*

Therefore a foster carer must be emotionally prepared to approach a new placement. If a placement ends in breakdown foster carers assert that it is easier if they are allowed some time to explain the situation to the child and the extended family (Strover, 1996:329). This lessens the impact of loss for the carer as they have time to prepare for the departure. Triseliotis et al. (1998) found that the main reason why foster carers cease fostering was due to dissatisfaction with the operation of some aspect of the fostering services. Therefore, when approaching a new foster placement, it is vital that foster carers

have resolved or made an attempt to resolve their difficulties with the aspects of the system they have an issue with.

Research indicates that families who foster have a higher level of ‘hardiness’ (Hendrix and Ford, 2003) than non-fostering families. Indicating that there is a natural ability to cope and deal with difficult situations. Over time if dissatisfaction with the fostering system persists, this hardiness can be broken down, and family units can become more vulnerable. Fatigue and burnout can be experienced by foster carers and this is a contributing factor to placement breakdown (Brown and Bednar, 2006). It also influences foster carers decision to foster in the future. The following section examines methods of supporting foster carers and approaches to preventing placement breakdown.

### ***3.5 Preventing Placement Breakdown and Providing for Foster Carers Needs.***

Within both the United Kingdom and the United States there has been a move towards “*addressing placement stability*” (Blakey et al, 2012:369), where supports and preventative measures are implemented to attempt to reduce the number of placement breakdowns. This movement has come about as prevention of placement breakdown is more cost effective for social work departments (ibid). One method employed within a UK context is the implementation of a ‘consultation model’, where foster carers have access to support and advice from social workers and psychologists on a 24/7 basis. Within this model foster carers are seen as “*the expert for their child*” (Golding and Picken, 2004:74). This model works in conjunction with the strengths based approach which “*places value on the input of the carer*” (O’ Dell, 2008:19). It has been found that this model has led to a reduction in foster carers fears around tackling difficult situations that may arise with their foster children. Strengths-based approach encourages “*dialogue and collaboration*” (O’Dell, 2008:20) which gives foster carers opportunities to make contributions to the decision making process.

Greater emphasis on training is another major factor that helps support foster carers and prevent placement breakdown. Delivering specifically tailored parenting programmes has been found to be effective in terms of aiding foster carers training needs (Golding and Picken, 2004). Specific emphasis is placed on the delivery of these programmes within foster carer groups, where informal networks of support can be built up and utilised. Carers reported an *“increase in their confidence and ability to cope with the children”* (Golding and Picken, 2004:34) as a result of attending these programmes. However while training of foster carers is paramount it has also been found that *“carer involvement in the training and education of health professionals”* (Repper, 2006:511) is a useful tool in helping professionals gain a greater understanding of the issues and difficulties faced by carers within the field.

Overall it would appear that there is *“the need for more effective and timely support when placements are in crisis”* (Brookes et al, 2011:105). Devising and implementing a best practice policy that provides guidelines in relation to all aspects of placement breakdown within social work departments may allow for more appropriate supports to be available to foster carers.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

Overall this chapter has outlined the law and social policy that underpins practice in relation to foster care in Ireland. It outlines the supports that are available to foster carers in the form of link workers. However it would appear that counselling support is offered on a discretionary case by case basis. The HIQA (2010) Standards outline clearly the role of foster carers; however it fails to mention measures that may support foster carers in the wake of placement breakdown. The causes of placement breakdown are examined as issues relating to support, training, communication and engagement have a significant impact on foster carers in the wake of placement breakdown. The impact of grief and loss on foster carers is explored in greater detail and the factors associated with foster carers approach to future placement are dissected. A discussion pertaining to methods of preventing placement breakdown concludes the chapter.



## **Chapter Four: Research Findings.**

### ***4.1 Introduction***

This chapter presents and analyses the primary research findings. The research findings are quite extensive and for the purpose of analysing the data the researcher focuses on the major themes of grief and loss, powerlessness, approach to future foster placements and needs of foster carers if placement breakdown occurs.

### ***4.2 The Impact of Placement Breakdown on Foster Carers***

The research findings demonstrate that foster placement breakdown has had a profound and lasting effect on all of the foster carers interviewed. The impact has far reaching emotional impact – grief and loss, anger, frustration, hurt, guilt and feelings of powerlessness are the main emotional responses reported. However, it would appear that placement breakdown also impacts on foster carers confidence, it can create tensions between carers and social workers and it would appear that placement breakdown impacts on how future placements are approached. The findings highlight that foster carers have a clear set of needs (that are individual to their circumstances) after placement breakdown has occurred. Understanding these needs and ensuring that they are met has implications for social work practice across the board.

### ***4.3 Grief and Loss***

The overarching theme that has emerged from examining the impact of placement breakdown on foster carers is the impact of *grief and loss*. Each foster carer interviewed spoke of the significant loss that they, and other family members, felt at the departure of the foster child;

*...It was such a loss to us, such a loss. It was so upsetting, and the house just wasn't the same after she went... (Monica).*

Some of the foster carers interviewed likened placement breakdown to the experience of the death of a loved one;

*...It was like a death completely like a death, like we went through every emotion you would associate with someone dying or leaving you suddenly... (Karen).*

*...It's like someone dying; it's like a bereavement... (Mary).*

*...But it's worse than a bereavement because you had all the feelings of this child was gone...but we were still seeing him and there was nothing we could do for him... (John).*

*...It was like a death... (Monica).*

Edelstein et al, (2001) discusses how grief touches every aspect of a person's life in different ways and it is fair to say that the loss of a foster child through placement breakdown brings about a form of grief that is a very personal and a unique experience for every foster carer. Shelia compared the experience to that of *"losing your own child"*. In many cases the children are viewed as the foster carers own children *"he was very much part of the family"* (Mary). Consequently the children build relationships with the foster carers family and are viewed as sisters, brothers, nieces, nephews, grandchildren and cousins within that family. This demonstrates how foster carers and their extended family become *"emotionally invested"* (Butler and Charles, 1999:56). It would appear that the foster family become so involved in trying to help and accept the foster child that if the placement breaks down it can be very difficult for the foster carer and the family to accept that the person they viewed as a family member has moved on and is no longer part of their family.

Many of the foster carers spoke of the void that was left in their lives and the lives of others in the family following the immediate aftermath of the breakdown *"there was nothing to fill the void"* (John). Monica found it very difficult to manage this void in the life of another foster child in the house stating that;

*...I kept saying to the social workers will you please get me another child, I wanted so much to make it up to my other foster child... (Monica).*

This demonstrates how Monica became entwined in the bargaining stage within the grief process; she wanted so much to fill the void that her way of coping was to look for another foster child. Indeed all of the carers spoke of the different stages of grief they went through. For some the anger stage was quite memorable as the foster carer became embroiled in an emotional tug of war between expressing their anger at the situation, placing blame on others (child protection social workers in particular) and also feeling angry and disappointed with themselves. As discussed within the literature review, guilt is a common theme that is associated with foster placement breakdown (Foster Care and Adoption Resource Centre, 2009) and these foster carers experiences were no exception;

*...It's a hurt and a guilt that you feel, that you have failed and you are angry with yourself, but you are also angry with the situation... (Jenny)*

Foster carers in general spend some time blaming themselves, pondering what they did wrong (Brookes et al, 2011). This blaming behaviour was identified by Sheila who stated;

*...I was blaming myself for a long time, I was guilty I wondered did I deal with her right, did I do this right, did I do that right, then I blamed bad management, the list of blame was endless...*

While Kubler Ross's model of grief ends with the acceptance stage (Romaine, 2002), for some foster carers this stage appeared to be desirable but had not yet been reached;

*...I'll never be fully over it, my children say I am obsessed but it's just she was my child and all the work that I put into her, but I did it because she was my child and that was the end of it, I can never accept what happened... (Sheila).*

For others' the journey to acceptance had been arduous;

*...okay it's a situation that has happened, it was horrific, but you talk about it, you deal with it and then you get over it... (Jenny).*

With the support and help of family, friends and professionals the foster carers were facilitated in overcoming the feelings of grief and loss associated with placement breakdown.

## Support

In terms of coping and dealing with the loss of a foster child through placement breakdown, foster carers cited their spouse, close friends or family as the people they turned to for support in the immediate aftermath of the placement breakdown. Most foster carers named their fostering link worker as a strong source of support and this would correlate with the literature which outlines the value foster carers place on the support of their link worker (Selick, 2006). However there was a certain amount of criticism regarding the perceived lack of support for foster carers from child's social workers. This issue of support from child protection social workers proved to be quite contentious and was the cause of deep rooted anger and hurt for some foster carers. Karen *"felt there could have been at least a phone call to see how we were getting on"*. Sometimes tensions between carers and child protection social workers impacted on how foster carers engaged with particular social workers following the placement breakdown. Kirton et al (2007) argues that it is often difficult to repair fractured relations between carers and social workers where major disagreements have occurred. For some it felt as if the loss of the foster child was undermined *"I was told to move on, she had gone so I had to deal with it and move on"* (Sheila) and was not viewed as a serious loss by some social workers;

*...Sometimes I think they just become ambivalent to it and I wonder do they really see the distress that a family is actually in because of the loss... (Karen).*

Foster carers found themselves in a position where they had to manage and cope with their own grief over the loss of the foster child through placement breakdown, and they also had to manage the grief and loss of others within the family, be it other foster children, natural children, spouse or extended family;

*...and my aunts would be ringing me asking when she was coming home, and what could I say to them, I didn't know what to say to them, she was their niece and I didn't know how to tell them she wouldn't be coming home... (Sheila).*

Karen spoke of how *"the fall out was huge for the other children in the house"* and Jenny spoke of the struggle she had regarding explaining the breakdown to her other children stating that *"the kids don't know what happened in the end, it's not going to do them any good knowing"*. This indicates that while link workers were a source of support there are still significant gaps in terms of emotional support that foster carers have indicated they need in the wake of placement breakdown. While some foster carers

were offered counselling, others were “*left to their own devices*” (Jenny). In the case of the couple who were interviewed the foster mother was offered counselling support as she was seen as the primary carer in the eyes of the HSE, however the foster father was not offered this support as “*they couldn’t afford to pay for everybody*” (John).

However some foster carers believed that they have a greater level of emotional endurance that is directly related to their life experience which can help them cope following placement breakdown;

*...I think that part of your mechanism of dealing with something is there already, and I feel I have it there in my life skills, my age and having my own children...* (Jenny).

This would appear to correlate with the fact that foster families tend to have a higher level of hardiness and have a natural ability to cope with difficult situations (Hendrix and Ford, 2003). Despite this innate ability to cope foster carers are sometimes left with a feeling of powerlessness and loss of control over the situation as a whole.

#### ***4.4 Powerlessness/Loss of Control***

Another major theme that emerged from the primary research is the feeling of powerlessness and loss of control felt by foster carers preceding, during, and in the aftermath of placement breakdown. This theme is not as evident within the literature review, however, aspects of the powerlessness felt by foster carers is captured within the impact of communication and engagement issues that surround placement breakdown. Each foster carer cited that the loss of control and the feeling of powerlessness within placement breakdown had a tremendous impact on their lives;

*...You want to have control, you tried to have it but the control was taken away from you...*  
(Jenny).

*...I was powerless, because ya know you are told to keep away...* (Sheila).

*...It left me and my husband and I suppose the rest of the family quite powerless overall...that we had no control over the situation...* (Karen).

There were different ways in which foster carers felt powerless. The primary reason related to communication and engagement issues between foster carers and social workers.

### **Communication and Engagement**

Foster carers asserted being left out of the decision making process regarding the child, either prior to the placement breaking down or regarding decisions in relation to the future welfare and placement of the child as the main source of feeling powerless. Many foster carers felt that their opinions were ignored by social workers during the decision process creating a great deal of frustration and anger;

*...She [child's social worker] has no understanding of the bigger picture, so it for me then was very frustrating and it was like you were in ya know a black hole... (Sheila).*

In the immediate aftermath of the breakdown it was felt that foster carers could be given the opportunity to have more input in terms of discussing the needs of the child within their next placement. Within the literature it is indicated that if foster carers are included in this process it “*reduces carers sense of failure*” (Butler and Charles, 1999:56) which may facilitate the beginning of the healing process. Where possible foster carers wanted to make the transition as easy as possible for the child

*...We got things for her new room, I would have liked to have seen where she was going, I would have liked to know what colour scheme was in the room because I was taking her to buy her new duvet cover... (Mary)*

Foster carers who had contact with their foster child after placement breakdown reported mixed feelings about this contact. For some it was helpful and it has been indicated within the literature that contact is beneficial for both the child and the foster carer (Butler and Charles, 1999) however for others it was difficult;

*...We had some contact, not a lot. That in a way made it easier for me, I think it made it harder for my husband, because he held onto the hope that maybe there was some way that we could work with this situation... (Karen).*

For other foster carers seeing their foster child after placement breakdown further enhanced the feeling of powerlessness as they had no control over the child's situation. The "*emotional investment*" (Butler and Charles, 1999:56) of the foster carer within the child was highly evident after placement breakdown;

*...He couldn't even use a knife and fork when he came to us first, that soon slipped away once he was gone, and that was hard on us as well because we had put the effort into bringing him to that stage and to see that disappear was the worst part... (John).*

A child losing skills and behaviour dis-improving after placement breakdown was a source of great hurt to foster carers as they felt the time and effort they had put into the foster child was lost.

Foster carers felt ignored by child protection social workers and many felt that they knew the child and understood the needs of the child better than other professionals. However when they voiced their opinions carers felt they were not treated in the same way other professional opinions would be treated;

*...The foster care team treat you as professional foster carers and that is what you are told during your training...the child care team in our experience with a number of child care workers and managers don't treat you as professionals, they tend to treat you as some form of babysitter almost... (John).*

Foster carers experiences of being treated differently to other professionals involved with the child indicate that social workers continue to struggle to view foster carers as professionals and members of the team overall, thus validating the findings within the literature in relation to this matter (O' Dell, 2008). Lack of dialogue between social workers and foster carers contributed to foster carers feeling unacknowledged and underappreciated or disrespected. Decisions being taken by social workers without prior discussion or consultation with foster carers add to the sense of powerlessness;

*...I felt at least I should have been told before the meeting that this was going to happen, the way it was said at the meeting was like it had been decided beforehand and it just had to be said at the meeting and not discussed... (Jenny).*

Overall the feelings of grief and loss and powerlessness coupled with difficulties relating to support, communication and engagement add to the already difficult situation of placement breakdown. For some foster carers it is as a direct result of these feelings and experiences that their future approach to fostering is altered.

#### ***4.5 Approaching Future Foster placements***

A significant finding within the primary research that is not highly evident within the literature on the impact of foster placement breakdown on foster carers relates to foster carers approach to future foster placements following placement breakdown. Of the six foster carers interviewed three had not fostered new children since they experienced the breakdown, and three had taken a break before fostering another child. This would correlate with Romaine (2002:129) findings which state that “*foster carers need the permission and the time to grieve*”. Karen spoke of how taking a break was important for the whole family to “*catch our breath from what had happened*”. In terms of approaching a new foster placement all of the foster carers indicated that they would be more stringent on the type of child they fostered in the future. They felt this was necessary in order to protect both themselves and their families from the heartache of another placement breakdown;

*...I'd have my reservations about who I would foster in the future, but I think I need to because I am bringing the children into my family and it will affect everyone in the home and it is my responsibility if anything happens to anyone... (Jenny).*

A number of foster carers indicated that they would change the way they deal with foster children and the way that they engage with the HSE;

*...If she came in drunk again I would leave her go up the stairs, close the door and I would say nothing to anyone, that would be the end of it... (Monica)*

*...If it happened again I wouldn't tell the HSE I was having a problem, because when they get involved everything spirals and wrong decisions are made which add to the problems... (Sheila).*



Many of the foster carers stated that the experience of placement breakdown had made them better carers and their eyes were also more open to the pit falls within the fostering system. However this experience also raised questions regarding the level of training foster carers receive regarding placement breakdown.

### **Training.**

While there was a recognition from all foster carers that *“no amount of training can prepare you for the event when it happens”* (Monica), there was also a general consensus that placement breakdown was only touched on within initial training. Very little training with respect to the impact it can have on foster carers and their families was covered. Some of the foster carers felt they were not prepared enough to deal with the breakdown and the aftermath. They felt this lack of preparedness was down to lack of training on issues relating to placement breakdown. Training days were identified as a great source of support to foster carers where they could meet other carers and discuss issues relating to fostering. Foster carers reported feeling more confident and able to cope with the challenges of fostering after training, which is in line with the literature (Golding and Picken, 2004). These findings highlight that foster carers have a clear set of training needs when it comes to placement breakdown. There are also other needs identified by carers which will be discussed in the next section.

#### ***4.6 Needs of Foster Carers if Placement Breakdown Occurs***

The final theme that emerged from the primary research relates to the needs of foster carers when placement breakdown occurs. The findings indicate that foster carers have a clear set of needs that are unique and personal to their circumstance. The foster carers interviewed highlighted a number of needs that they felt should be considered in the event of placement breakdown happening. These needs fall under the headings of support, communication and engagement and training.

#### 4.6.1 Support

Foster carers acknowledged that support was a key component required in the wake of placement breakdown. Figure 4.1 encapsulates the support needs identified by foster carers.

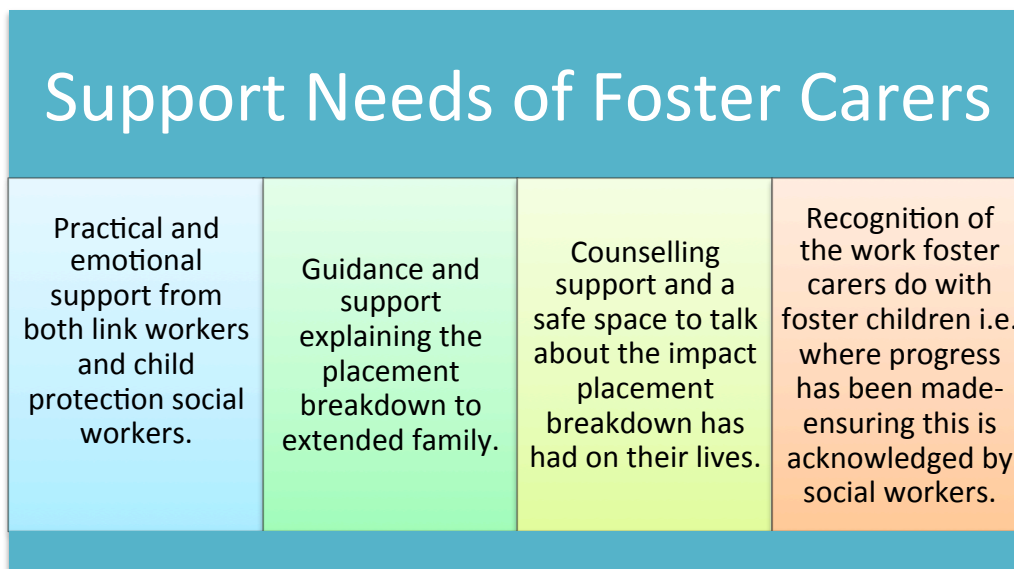


Figure 4.1.

Edelstein et al. (2001:17) states that;

*A network of professionals, friends, and family, as well as societal values that affirm the foster parents' work, respect their attachment to the children they foster, and validate their feelings of loss when a child leaves, are important supports to facilitate healthy expression of the grief as well as to alleviate the intensity of grief the foster parent experiences.*

This indicates that foster carers require a team of support in the wake of placement breakdown to help them grieve and cope with the situation. In order to provide this level of support to foster carers a great deal of communication and engagement coupled with inter-agency collaboration between link workers, child protection social workers and the extended family is required.

#### 4.6.2 Communication and Engagement

Foster carers throughout the interviews indicated that the level and type of communication and engagement they experienced impacted on their overall experience of placement breakdown. Where a good relationship between social worker and foster carer existed, there was a greater level of communication and engagement which lessened the impact of the breakdown on foster carers. Contact with the foster child after the placement had been terminated was preferable in most of the cases; however when this was denied it caused great distress and pain to foster carers. Butler and Charles (1999:56) argue that;

*Consideration should be given to some form of continuing contact between carers and young people, this would help reduce carers sense of failure, improve their role satisfaction, and provide young people with an additional source of support.*

More input by foster carers in relation to the future placement of the child was identified as being desirable as foster carers felt they knew and understood the needs of the child, therefore their opinion should be taken on board.

Figure 4.2 outlines the communication and engagement needs of foster carers in the event of placement breakdown.

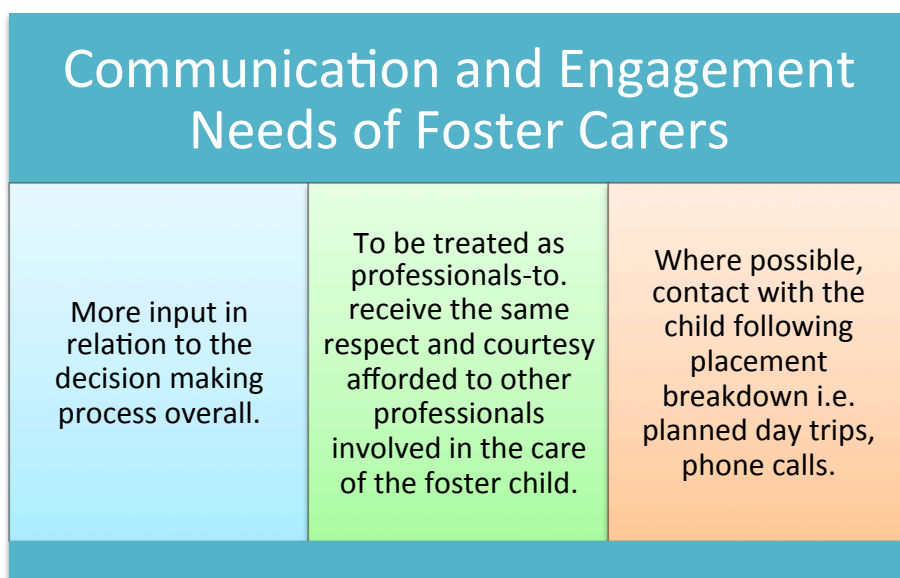


Figure 4.2.

### 4.6.3 Training

Most of the foster carers interviewed indicated that they did not feel prepared to deal with placement breakdown. While recognition was given to the fact that it is a difficult experience to prepare for as everyone experiences it differently, the general consensus was that more could be done in terms of training and preparing foster carers for placement breakdown and the emotional impact. Figure 4.3 encapsulates foster carers training needs in relation to both helping to prevent placement breakdown and also equipping them with the skills to deal with breakdown if it occurs.

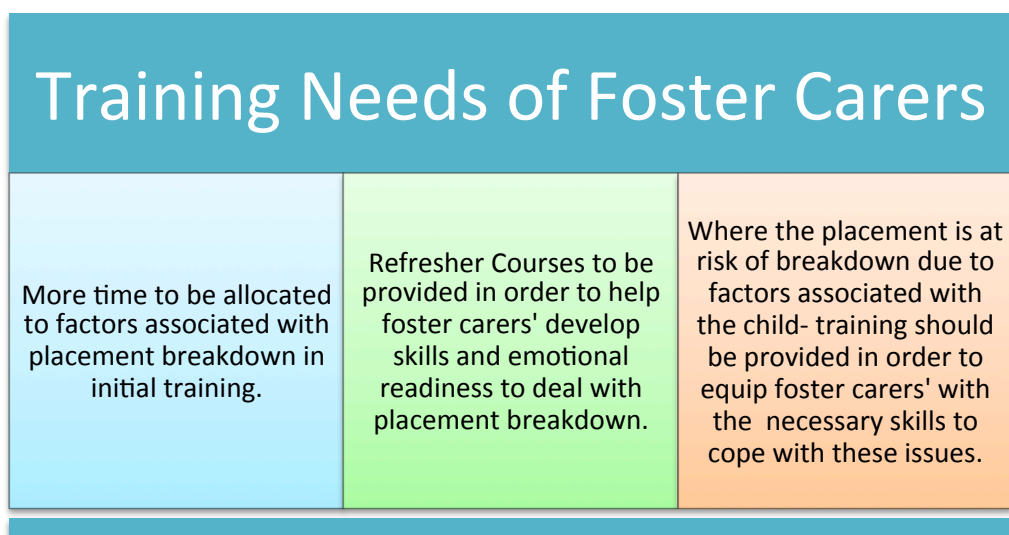


Figure 4.3

If these training needs are provided for foster carers will be in a better position to recognise the signs of placement breakdown and to deal with the aftermath that follows.

### 4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the primary research findings, which was gathered from six foster carers during semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate that grief and loss has a significant impact on foster carers lives following placement breakdown. It have been demonstrated that foster carers journey through a process similar to Kubler Ross's model of grief, except in this case it can be difficult for foster carers to reach the acceptance stage. Foster carers experienced feelings of powerlessness as a result of being excluded from decision making processes. It would appear that difficulties associated with communication and engagement between social workers and foster carers contribute to foster

carers feeling powerless within a placement breakdown situation. It is clear that there is a correlation between foster carers experience of placement breakdown and their subsequent approach to new foster placements. All of the foster carers indicated that they have become much more stringent in terms of the type of placement they would take on in the future, with some foster carers indicating that they not foster again as a result of their experience of placement breakdown. Foster carers have identified a clear set of their needs that they feel should be considered in the event of placement breakdown. These needs relate to the provision of improved emotional support for foster carers and their families, more input from foster carers in relation to the future care needs of the child and the provision of more training in relation to placement breakdown and how to cope with the emotional impact and aftermath. Foster carers feel if these needs are met they will be able to survive placement breakdown and go on to foster again in the future.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusion and Recommendations.**

### ***5.1 Introduction***

This chapter summarises the main findings within the study and contains a final discussion pertaining to the findings. In addition, recommendations outlined by the researcher are included. A final reflection and concluding remarks from the researcher draw the research to a close.

### ***5.2 Key Findings and Final Discussion***

Within this section the researcher returns to the initial research questions outlined within Chapter One and discusses the findings with these questions in mind. The overall aim of this research was to unearth the impact of foster placement breakdown on foster carers. Through the use of a policy and literature review and primary research encompassing semi-structured interviews with six foster carers it has been established that placement breakdown has a profound and lasting impact on foster carers. The overarching theme that emerged is the impact of grief and loss on foster carers. It would appear that foster carers become emotionally invested in their foster children. If the placement ends in breakdown the foster carer feels they have failed both the child and themselves. It became clear that some foster carers felt they needed time to grieve and process after placement breakdown, whereas others attempted to 'fill the void' by seeking to foster again. Support was cited as the primary method of facilitating the healing process. Foster carers agreed that more support should be available from the child's social worker and their link worker to guide and help them explain the placement breakdown to their extended family. Others felt that counselling support should be extended to include any family member who is directly affected by the placement breakdown. This finding asserts that while support is available to the foster carers from link workers, (which is provided for within the *National Standards for Foster Care 2003*) this support does not adequately deal with the overall emotional needs of the foster carer. Foster carers feel that social workers overall could recognise to a greater extent the work that they do with children in care. This ties into the debate that foster carers are professionals and deserve the respect and courtesy afforded to other professions. However it would appear that social

workers continue to struggle to view foster carers as professionals and as a result carers feel demoralised and unacknowledged.

Foster carers asserted that their experiences of placement breakdown brought about feelings of powerlessness. This came about through communication and engagement issues between social workers and foster carers. Foster carers emphasized being left out of the decision making process regarding their foster child left them feeling powerless and without a voice. This contributed to poor relations between the child's social worker and the foster carer. Foster carers stated that more time to prepare the child and the extended family for the move would be beneficial and it would serve to lessen the impact of grief and loss. Continued contact with the foster child after the placement was terminated was preferable in most cases. Although this can also add to foster carers feelings of powerlessness as they found it difficult to see children losing skills that they had acquired in their care, and they had no power or control to change the situation.

The findings indicate that placement breakdown directly impacts on foster carers approach to future placements. Carers outline quite clearly that they become more stringent on what type of placement they will take on in the future. For some, returning to fostering was something which was still under consideration and for others a break was necessary after to recover emotionally. Many foster carers acknowledged that placement breakdown is a difficult experience to prepare for; however, they also felt that more could be done to meet carers training needs in relation to placement breakdown.

It is clear from the research findings that every foster carer experiences placement breakdown differently and every carer has a unique set of needs in relation to placement breakdown. These translate into more support being provided, be it practical or emotional support from link workers and the child's social worker. Carers call for more emphasis to be placed on their voice within the decision making process and that their training needs are attended to so as to ensure that they are prepared for placement breakdown. It would appear that the supports, policies and procedures in relation to placement breakdown are very ad-hoc across the board. While the new HIQA *Draft National Quality*

*Standards for Residential and Foster Care for Services for Children and Young People (2010)* provide an extensive explanation regarding the role of foster carers there appears to be no standard policy that has been implemented in relation to placement breakdown which outlines what supports foster carers are entitled to in the event of its' occurrence. It would appear that practice across the board differs in relation to how foster carers are treated in terms of meeting their support, communication and engagement and training needs. This is highly evident in the varying experiences of foster carers who were interviewed within this study. The following section outlines the researcher's recommendations which may serve to ameliorate some of the issues foster carers identify as having a significant impact on them in the wake of placement breakdown

### **5.3 Recommendations**

1. A Foster Carer Plan (similar to a Child Care Plan) should be implemented, whereby the individual and specific needs of the foster carer and the extended family in relation to placement breakdown i.e. training and support needs are outlined. This Foster Carer Plan should be drawn up in collaboration with link workers, the child's social worker, and the extended family. The plan should be reviewed and revisited if placement breakdown occurs so as to ensure that foster carers needs are met.
2. The researcher recognises that the Irish Foster Care Association has in place a support service which offers support to foster carers in the form of telephone calls, attendance at meetings, help in letter writing, mediation with social workers or other HSE personnel and lobbying with the Dept. of Children on particular issues (IFCA, 2012, [online]). The researcher recommends that this support service be extended to incorporate access to support and advice from social workers as well as trained foster carers on a 24/7 basis (perhaps through the extension of helpline services). This service could act as an access point to further emotional support in times when that support is not available due to the nature of the hours that social workers work.
3. The researcher recommends that the Irish Foster Care Association publicise this support service to a greater extent so as to ensure that all foster carers are aware of the support services that are available to them. The researcher suggests that IFCA and the HSE collaborate on this project in an effort to share costs and resources.



4. The research findings highlight that social workers across the board need to recognise and value the work undertaken by foster carers. In response to this issue the researcher suggests a number of training days should occur on an annual basis, whereby social workers and foster carers come together and undertake joint training. This would facilitate understanding and respect of roles and would help nurture team work which in turn leads to greater communication and engagement between social workers and foster carers.

5. A Best Practice Policy in respect of Placement Breakdown should be devised and implemented within all social work departments. This policy should take into consideration the needs of the foster child and the foster carer and should contain a risk assessment to identify placements that are in danger of breaking down, as well as support services that can be made available to foster carers if placement breakdown occurs. Foster children and foster carers should be consulted and involved within the formulation of this policy so as to ensure that all stakeholders have a voice within the process.

The researcher recognises that in an era of economic downturn it may not be possible to implement some of the above recommendations due to financial and resource constraints within both the Irish Foster Care Association and social work departments. However, if these recommendations are attended to, they have the potential to reduce the number of placement breakdowns across the board, which serves to reduce not only the financial burden associated with placement breakdown but also the emotional cost to foster children and foster carers alike. Therefore investing in implementing the recommendations could pay dividends into the future.

### ***5.5 Concluding Remarks***

In summation foster placement breakdown has a significant impact on foster carers and it is often the case that this impact is not recognised. Foster carers grieve the loss of a foster child through placement breakdown in a similar manner to grieving the death of a loved one. However, this grief is coupled with feelings of powerlessness as a result of difficulties with social workers and social work practice. Placement breakdown dictates how foster carers approach future fostering placements therefore a great deal of support and thought should be put into helping foster carers overcome the impact of placement breakdown. Foster carers should be given an opportunity to outline their individual needs in relation to

placement breakdown and every effort should be made to meet these needs so as to ameliorate the impact of the breakdown. Foster carers are the back bone upon which the care system stands, without their input and dedication to children in care, it is fair to say that the landscape of the care system in Ireland would be very different. As a result foster carers should be cherished and valued and every effort should be made to ensure that if foster placement breakdown occurs, the impact on foster carers is recognised to the same extent as the impact on foster children, and that carers receive the support and respect they deserve in order to move on from this difficult experience and continue to foster into the future.

## ***5.6 Conclusion***

This chapter concludes the research and opens with a final discussion and analysis pertaining to the research findings. A number of recommendations are outlined by the researcher. The final section contains a final reflection from the researcher which highlights aspects of the research process with particular emphasis being placed on the journey of the researcher through the research. The researcher concludes with some final remarks.

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## **Appendix A- Letter to Participants.**

RE: Taking part in Research in relation to Foster Placement Breakdown

Dear

My name is Eimear Roche and I am a final year *Masters of Social Work Student* studying at University College Cork. As part of the Masters programme I am undertaking research on behalf of The Irish Foster Care Association- Waterford Branch. I am writing to ascertain if you would be interested in taking part in this research? I received you're details from \*\*\* who is the liaison person between The Irish Foster Care Association-Waterford Branch, UCC and the Fostering Department.

The topic of my research is 'An Exploration of the Impact of Placement Breakdown on Foster Carers. As part of the research I would like to interview foster carers that have experienced placement breakdown to gain a greater insight and understanding of the impact of placement breakdown on foster carers. The research would consist of a one to one informal interview with myself at a location and time that is convenient for you. It would take no more than one hour. Your identity would be kept totally confidential and the information gathered would also be kept in strict confidence.

If you are interested in taking part in the study could you contact me on my mobile at \*\*\* before March 7<sup>th</sup>. If you would like any more information in relation to this research please do not hesitate to contact me.

Looking forward to hearing from you,

Kind Regards,

Eimear Roche

Masters of Social Work Student, UCC.

# **Appendix B-Informed Consent and Consent Form.**

## **INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

### **Information Sheet**

**Purpose of the Study.** As part of the requirements for The Masters of Social Work at UCC, I have to carry out a research study. The study is concerned with exploring Foster Carers experiences of placement breakdown specifically looking at the impact of placement breakdown on Foster Carers.

**What will the study involve?** The study will involve interviewing a sample of Foster Carers exploring their experience of placement breakdown.

**Why have you been asked to take part?** You have been asked because of your experience as a Foster Carer.

**Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?** Yes. I will ensure that no clues to your identity appear in the thesis. Any extracts from what you say that are quoted in the thesis will be entirely anonymous.

**What will happen to the information which you give?** The data will be kept confidential for the duration of the study. On completion of the thesis, they will be retained for a further two months and then destroyed.

**What will happen to the results?** The results will be presented in the thesis. They will be seen by my supervisor, a second marker and the external examiner. The thesis may be read by future students on the course. The study may be published in a research journal. The findings will be presented to Foster Carers at a later date, (to be arranged).

**What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?** It is possible that talking about your experience may cause some distress. It is not the intention of the research to cause any distress.

**What if there is a problem?** At the end of the interview, I will discuss with you, how you found the experience and how you are feeling. If you subsequently feel distressed, you should contact you're fostering Link Worker.

**Any further queries?** If you need any further information, you can contact me at: \*\*\*

## Consent Form

I.....agree to participate in Eimear Roche's research study.

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing.

I am participating voluntarily.

I give permission for my interview with Eimear to be tape-recorded.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data within two weeks of the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity.

I understand that the study may be published in a research journal and online as part of the Science Shop Project.

I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the thesis and any subsequent publications if I give permission below:

(Please tick one box:)

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview

I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview

Signed.....

Date.....

## **Appendix C- Interview Questions.**

1. What is your experience of fostering to date?
2. What motivated you to foster?
3. What does placement breakdown mean to you?
4. What is your experience of placement breakdown?
5. How did this experience impact on you?
6. How did you cope? Who did you turn to?
7. Did you receive any supports from official bodies i.e. Child Protection, Fostering at this time?
8. What training, if any, do you get in relation to dealing with placement breakdown?
9. Did you feel prepared to deal with the breakdown and the aftermath?
10. If the situation were to occur again what/if anything would you do differently?
11. In what way would you as a foster carer like to be supported if breakdown occurs?
12. Has placement breakdown affected your desire to foster in the future? Why? To what extent?
13. In what way does placement breakdown differ to planned endings to placement?